



Meetings in Four Corners

The Hunt for a Lost Brother and Other Villains

Part 2 of The Seven Brothers Saga



“Chris.”

Chris laid the menu down and looked up, “Garrett. Thought I was meeting Junior.”

“He’s not here yet? After the lecture, he gave me about being on time. I have too much to do than wait on him.” A year younger than his brother, Garrett had the air of a businessman on the way up the corporate ladder, causing Chris to wonder at the man’s choice of occupation. With his easy smile and down-home manners, Junior was infinitely better suited for running the Mountain’s Edge ranch.

“If he’s not here in the next couple of minutes, I’m ordering,” Chris said, grinning, as Garrett pulled out a seat. The fact of the matter was he sort of liked his cousins now they had grown up some and now he didn’t have to deal with his Uncle’s ...prejudices.

“How have you been?”

“Can’t complain too much. You?”

“I’m complaining. Buck had us all ride out to Bailey’s Creek yesterday. Sounded like a good idea at the time, but now I’m thinking tar and feathering Buck would not come close to letting him know how I feel.”

“Getting old, Chris?”

“I must be.”

"Buck sounds like he's being Buck. How's Nathan? I heard he was back in town."

"Yep, he is. He's over at the clinic right now. I'll probably have to use a crowbar to pry him away. He starts seeing patients tomorrow and wants to be ready for them."

"I figured, when he stayed away so long, he wasn't coming back."

Chris shrugged. He heard the unspoken condemnation in Garret's voice but held his temper. He was here to find out what Junior wanted, not to knock manners into Garret. "Speaking of brothers, where's yours?"

"Your guess is as good as mine?"

"Do you know why he wanted to talk?"

"Nah, not really. He came home late on Thursday. He and Pa had another fight, but they have them so regular I didn't pay no mind to it." He toyed with the salt and pepper shakers for a moment, then looked up, an unexpected look of melancholy in his eyes. "Nothing against you, Chris, but I resent that Junior always runs to you first about his problems. He didn't invite me; I overheard you two on the phone. He doesn't know I'm here." He twisted in his seat to better see the entrance, looking for his brother. "I don't know what his problem is... I know he's not happy working for that insurance company. He should never have left the ranch. He loves the place. All the improvements I've made were based on ideas he had when we were kids. He belongs here, more than I." Garrett looked away, but the intensity in his voice conveyed his feelings, "Junior refuses to understand, the only reason I took over running the place was because he left, and Pa needed someone... and... I really shouldn't be running off at the mouth like this. You've had your own loss. I'm sorry about your Pa. A good man, a better man to my family than we deserved."

"What are you talking about, Garret?" Chris leaned forward in his seat, hearing regret in Garrett's voice.

"I don't know, if you know, but your Pa owns twenty percent of our ranch. Owned. You own it now, I guess."

"I didn't know that," Chris said, wondering if the secrets were ever going to end.

"I found out a little over a year ago," he looked over at the door again rather than meet Chris's eyes and Chris wondered if he was being told this now, because it had something to do with Junior's call or because it was the first time he spent any time with his cousin since...since the fire. "You know my Pa has Alzheimer's?" Garret continued when he didn't see his brother.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Garret waved it off as though he didn't want anyone's pity. "Not many people know. It's early yet, and he's on some new medication that might help. Most times, you don't realize there is anything wrong." He tapped his fingers against the table, obviously not liking what he was about to say, "I've been running most things for a long while now, but Pa took care of a lot of the paperwork. Little over a year ago, he messed up an order. Long story short, after I took him to a doctor and got the news, I took a good look at the books and opened up the filing cabinets. I wanted to know if he'd messed up anything else.

"I found a file full of letters between your dad and Pa. The file goes back ten years but refers to something that happened years before then. The best I can figure is that at some point, Pa was in danger of losing the ranch, and your dad stepped in and saved it by investing in it. Each year, Pa sent a check to your pa for his share of the profits, and each year, Uncle Landon sent it back marked void and with a letter saying, 'plow my share back into the ranch.' It was funny, almost... each year the same words," he grew quiet again, looking out the window.

"What does Uncle Curtis say?"

"I asked once. He acted like he didn't know what I was talking about. I don't know if he was just avoiding the question or if Alzheimer's has erased that memory. Chris..."

"Garrett, I don't want your ranch, any part of it. Sounds like my dad was helping out his family. Your dad would have done the same."

"I knew you would say that, and you are wrong, Pa would not have done it. Chris, this agreement between our fathers, it--"

"I ain't interested in your ranch, Garrett. Plow the profits back into the ranch, same as always."

"It ain't the same, Chris. You have brothers," he attempted a smile, "and they may want their part of the profits. No, listen, please. I've been worrying about this for over a year now, more so since your

Pa died. I'm doing good at the ranch. Each year we've shown an increase in profits. I went to the bank and talked to Jimmy Hayes, and he said he can get me a loan at a low interest rate. I want to buy back your interest in my ranch."

"Garrett, it's your ranch. Whatever happened, I think it was a family thing. Forget it. What say let's order, I'm starving."

"Chris, I think this loan was the reason my pa never got along with yours. Pa hates to be beholden to anyone. I do too. Come over one day, take a look at the place, take a look at my books, and tell me what your price is."

"No, Garrett. How about you finding out what the original loan was and repaying that?"

"But--"

"Garrett, it's that or we continue things as they are."

Garret blinked a few times, and Chris looked away until his cousin regained his composure.

Garrett had inherited his father's pride, and obviously, he didn't like being beholden to anyone, either. Maybe Garrett was right, and owing money to Landon Larabee embittered Curtis. Who knew? His uncle had always been a bit of a mystery to him. What he did know was that Garrett inherited his backbone from someone other than his father. Uncle Curtis never would have faced a problem head-on like this. Chris found himself admiring the way Garrett was handling the awkward situation.

Chris signaled for the waitress and said, "Your brother shows up after making us wait this long, he can pay the tab."

"He probably had a flat tire," Garrett said, but as soon as he gave the waitress his order, he excused himself so he could step outside and make a phone call.

Chris didn't bother to watch the door or check his watch. With rare exceptions that usually meant a big family blow-up, if Junior said he was going to be someplace, he was. He hoped he was mistaken, but his gut told he wasn't something bad had happened to Junior. He sipped at his tea, keeping a calm exterior, but thinking through different scenarios that would keep Junior from calling and letting them know he was running late, and not a one of those scenarios was good.

His eyes tracked Garrett's progress toward him; his cousin didn't look particularly upset, just confused. "And?"

"Ashley says he's not there and his things are gone. Looks like he just up and left."

"What's going on, Garrett?" Chris used the tone he perfected years ago, when he had sorted through the Marks brothers' squabbles.

"I don't know Chris, honest, I don't," Garret ran a nervous hand through his cropped, red hair. "Junior came home on Thursday, like I told you. I was in one of the cabins working on the plumbing, and Ash came and got me. She said things between Pa and Junior were tense, and I had best get in there before they came to blows."

His hands grabbed a napkin, shredded it, and his eyes wouldn't meet Chris's eyes. "Pa's not himself... I know you know he is pretty hot-tempered, but he never hits. Not to say we didn't get our share of whippings, but he never hit one of us. I took off as fast as I could, but when I got to the house, it was over, and Junior's lip was bleeding, and Pa looked...lost, sorry, something. I don't know. I think he gets confused easily, and that makes him mad, and when he gets mad, he hits. Like I said, most of the time he's alright, but Junior and Pa haven't gotten along for years. I mean, even before this Alzheimer's business, they didn't see eye to eye. Junior doesn't understand... he doesn't understand what dad is going through, refuses to believe Pa has Alzheimer's. I've tried to talk to him, and he won't listen.

"I don't know why he came back this weekend. It sure wasn't to talk to me. It would be easy to believe he came to rile Pa, cause the two were snarling at each other all day Friday, but I can't believe he came up just to make Pa mad... He rode out Saturday morning. Didn't say a word to me, told Ash and Ma he had some things he needed to sort through. He was gone most of the day, and I don't know whether to be pissed he didn't help me out or be relieved he didn't hang around setting Pa off.

We avoided each other last night. I didn't see him this morning...Ash and I took Ma and the babies to church; he wasn't up when we left. Chris, I barged in on this meeting that the two of you had planned because part of me wanted to get that loan business off my chest. It's been bugging me something awful. And part of me wanted you to talk to Junior and find out what's eating him, but mostly, I

wanted you to get him to understand about Pa. He's probably gone home. Can you give him a couple of hours and give him a call?"

The waitress showing up with their food allowed Chris to compose his answer, make it a little more compassionate; he didn't take the opportunity and spoke the same words he had planned on saying before the waitress's intrusion. "Garrett, two things. One, I ain't good with talking with folk. Ask any of my brothers. You want someone to reconcile you and your brother, you should ask Buck, he's--" "Chris, he not--"

"Family? He's my brother, and Nathan is my brother. Whatever your Pa has said all these years about me being a true 'Marks' is wrong. I am a Larabee, and I have six brothers," he glared at Garrett. Maybe he was wrong to jump down Garrett's throat like that, but the man was about to spout one of Uncle Curtis's lines, and he heard more than enough of them coming from Uncle Curtis; he wasn't about to start listening to Garrett say the same thing.

Garrett flushed red but managed to look Chris in the eyes, "I know what my Pa said, and I know how he treated your brothers was wrong. I'm not about to start dictating who's your family and who's not your family. What I meant to say was, Buck does not have, through any fault of his own, the history of being there for me and my brothers. You do; you've always been there for us."

"Garrett, you came in complaining about how Junior never talks to you about his problems, complaining that he runs to me. Things won't change if I smooth things over for you. You handle it."

Garrett held his chin in his hand and was silent, digesting what Chris had said. Finally, he picked up his fork and knife and began cutting his steak. "You know, you're the reason he left town and didn't stay to run the ranch."

Chris arched an eyebrow in response.

"Nothing against you, but you were the yardstick Pa measured us by. And not a one of us was ever able to measure up. There were times I hated you. I hated that you were Pa's ideal son, and I didn't fill the bill. Bad as it was for me, Junior had it worse. I think it was because he and you look so much alike. You know, in pictures, you two look more like brothers than he and I do.

"Pa wanted him to be more of a Chris Larabee than you were. Anything you did, Junior was expected to do better, but he couldn't, none of us could. Early on, I knew I couldn't be you, and I figured Pa would have to accept it, but Junior kept trying, trying, and failing. All the Little League teams you were on, he was on too. Only, he didn't have the crowd yelling and cheering for him. I remember going to your games, didn't matter what sport... I remember watching you and hearing the crowd cheer for you, and Dad would lean over and say, 'In a few years, that's going to be Junior.' Junior played sports like you did, but he was never the first pick, and he never led any team to state. Kids liked him and he had friends, but they weren't the cool friends; he was never popular, not like you. He studied, but he never brought home straight A's. When he was about fourteen, he quit trying. He and Pa had the first of many blow-ups. Looking back, I think he was just biding his time waiting for a chance to leave. He was tired of Pa wanting him to be you. That's why Jason left, too. And me ...I guess I stayed, because someone had to, and Jason and Junior had their bags packed and were out the door before I realized we were in a race to leave.

"I know this was Pa's doing and not yours, but that's why Junior, Jason, and me always ran to you with our problems. We heard all of our lives that the great Chris Larabee could do anything, solve any problem."

"Garrett! "

"Let's eat...I'll give Junior a call tonight."

"Garrett, I screw up things just like everyone else. Sometimes, better than anyone else. Ask any of my brothers."

"It doesn't matter. You could be the lowest of snakes, and Pa would still believe you were God's gift to the world." Garrett pushed his plate away and apologized, "I shouldn't have said those things. It's just that I want you to understand, Junior. We get stuck in traps of our own making. He can't come back to a place he loves because he isn't you. I can't leave this place because I want to prove it doesn't matter that I am not you. Jase...he says he doesn't have anything to prove, and I know he doesn't believe a word he says."

Garrett stayed a short while longer, talking about the weather, the price of beef, and a myriad of other things people say to each other when they have already said the important things. Chris stood up,

argued politely about the bill, and shook Garrett's hand when they agreed he would pick up the tab. He didn't follow him out to the street; instead, he sipped at the coffee. Inez sat near his elbow before disappearing into the kitchen.

Lord, he almost prayed, remembering at the last moment he did not pray to a cruel god, what happened? Garrett has so much to be happy for: his beautiful wife and his children, his parents are still alive, and even if his relationship with his brothers isn't the best, at least he has them. He has all that, and he is so bitter. Has he always been that way, and I missed seeing it, or has he just recently turned bitter? I wish I had found the words to tell him, he has everything I want. I would give anything to have my Sarah and my Adam back. I want to talk to Dad and have him answer me. I would love to have at least a few memories of my mother. Garrett, you have so much. So, what, that you aren't me? Who would want to be me anyway?



Vin dropped a handful of quarters in the stamp dispenser and made his selection, muttering all the while about how fast the price of stamps was going up and up and service was going down and down. He stopped muttering and kicked his toe against the wall. He sounded just like old lady Hicks, one of his foster mothers. There was no way he ever wanted to sound like that old witch, not even over something as innocent as stamps.

Stamping the envelopes, he considered the contents before dropping them into the out-of-town slot. He stayed up after the others called it a night, writing and then printing letters to the police officers who investigated his mother's murder. Years ago, Harry helped him find the men.

They had been reluctant to talk with a hot-headed fifteen-year-old boy demanding answers about his mother's murder, and it had taken every ounce of persuasion he had in him to convince them he needed to know what had happened to the smiling woman he remembered. Finally, they caved in to his pleas and showed him the official reports minus the photos. He hadn't wanted to see the grisly photos anyway; he had just wanted to have some understanding of why his mother had been killed. The reports had shed no light on her murder, but the Vin had understood the report was all he was going to get. The two detectives did not want to discuss their failure with Cady Tanner's son.

The fact that he was now an adult, combined with his years as a bounty hunter, and his concern that his mother's death may be connected to other mysterious deaths, may make them more interested in talking with him. He'd give them a few days to read his letter and think. Then he'd call and set up a meeting with them and find out what they knew about his Mom's death that didn't get written down.

He climbed into his truck but didn't start the motor immediately. He opened up his laptop and made a few notes to himself. He had two ongoing investigations, and he needed to be careful about how he handled his time. As eager as he was to find out about his Mother's murder, finding Ezra was his immediate concern.

He hadn't pressed either Monica or Cindy about it, but he had taken note of Cindy's concern for Ezra's cough. Nathan hit the ceiling when he discovered evidence that Ezra wrapped his ribs, something about not breathing properly and turning the lungs into breeding grounds for nasty bacteria. Chris had calmed his brother's ranting by pointing out Ezra had at least taken his antibiotic pills with him. Had he? If he had, it didn't seem likely he was taking them, not if he had a bad cough. Or had Ezra bred one of those new bacteria he had talked about in the hospital, the kind that slowly turned its host into slush?

He didn't know in what kind of shape he would find Ezra, but he did know he needed to find him soon. He may not have some weird bacteria growing in him, but even without that worry, he was not in good enough shape to seek revenge or whatever he was doing- protecting his mom. She was the missing link to Moore. Find her, and they would find Moore. Find Moore, and they would find their brother. Sounded easy enough in theory, but his initial search, last night, turned up nothing more than Ezra's birth certificate and through it, her name, Maude Standish.

He could not find a birth certificate for the woman, and at two in the morning, he had come to the reluctant conclusion, Maude had been using an alias of sorts all those years ago. In his business, people using an alias were on the run. Had she been running when she met Landon Larabee, or was there a legitimate reason for Maude Standish not having a birth certificate?

He put his laptop aside and shifted the truck into reverse. He planned to take a good look at Four Corners on his way back to the ranch. This was his new home, and the only time he had looked at any of it had been the night before the meeting at Judge Travis' office. Time to change that.



Her eyes scrunched shut, Mary stood with her head tilted back so the water hit her in the face, poured through her hair, and rolled down her back to be grabbed by gravity and pulled down to the drain. She was tired. Not an aching tiredness caused by the physical work she had been doing over the last several days, trying to make the office and the apartment habitable. It was not the tired feeling you get from getting too little rest. She was tired of having to make decisions. While she knew her decision to leave Carson City and to relocate to this little town out in the middle of nowhere was the most consequential one she had ever made, the thought of what she had done drained her of all of her energy.

Moving meant leaving her memories of Stephen and their life together behind. She turned over the keys to their three-bedroom home with the fenced-in backyard and big wooden swing set to another family with two little boys. New people would be having get-togethers on the patio she and Stephen built with their own hands. Every time they hosted a barbecue, they received compliments on the patio and the beautiful backyard,

Moving meant she was not only leaving memories of Stephen behind, but her leaving diminished any chance of finding Stephen's murderer. Her hope that the police would find the man responsible for shattering her life kept her going for almost a whole year. She needed to know why Stephen had been murdered. She ached all the way down to the marrow of her bones with her need to understand how someone could kill one of the best, most honest men in the world. How was she going to get Stephen's murder solved from here? The police had all but quit working on it, and without her to push them to do their jobs, would they ever find the man who destroyed her life?

Orrin and Evie were right in saying she needed to leave Carson City if she planned on moving on without Stephen. More importantly, she could not allow Billy to live in the same house in which her husband had been murdered.

But was the right solution moving here, all the way on the other side of the state? She hadn't been able to think of a better one. If she planned to keep her followers on social media, she had better return to work.

It was funny how the social media business started. Stephen covered crime for the Carson City Gazette, while she spent her time as a glorified gopher on one of the local TV stations, running coffee to the anchors and handing them the copy they were supposed to read on air. At night, Stephen would share his dreams of writing about more important things than who robbed what store; she shared her dream of being an anchor.

One day, the station decided to interrupt local broadcasting to report on a car chase in progress through the streets of Carson City. She was the only one who had her hair combed, so to speak. Consequently, she found herself on air. Stephen took her little segment and showed her how to put it on social media. She watched, fascinated, as the number of people following her increased exponentially.

No one cared about the chase; instead, she was inundated with requests for makeup and hair tips. Within a year, she was a bona fide influencer. The money she brought in as an influencer allowed Stephen to quit his job at the paper and do real investigative journalism.

She wanted to go through Stephen's files and his computer to uncover what he had been working on that had caused him to be murdered in their home. No matter what, the police said it was probably a random burglary gone wrong, she knew it was more than that. The way Stephen checked all the doors two or three times before going to bed told her he was nervous about something he had uncovered. The checking and rechecking, and the fact that Stephen, who never carried a gun, began to do so, told her he was spooked. His death told her he was right to have been spooked.

Sighing, she put her memories away. She felt supremely proud that she had managed to run through her memories and regrets without throwing up. She poured the conditioner into her hair, hoping its claim of restoring shine and vitality was true.

Evie was right, she was starting over, and though it would be hard without Stephen, she had to get her life back under control for Billy's sake, if not for her own. She rinsed the conditioner from her hair and reached for a towel. Drying off, she snickered at her reflection, new haircut, fingernails polished and cut short (to disguise their mistreatment), makeup (concealer for those circles), shaved legs, and a whole new attitude; Billy wouldn't recognize her.

However, her followers, those who still followed and nosily inquired as to how she was doing, would recognize her. Within a week, they would be wearing her short hair and using the same shade of lipstick, in an attempt to be her. More importantly, with her following restored, she could hand out fashion advice during the day, before Billy got home from school, and at night, when he fell fast asleep, she would go through Stephen's files. She would investigate the things Stephen investigated, and she would find his murderer.

She needed a few good stories to share on her accounts or sell to a magazine to give her the credibility she would need to publish when she found the reason for Stephen's murder. For now, she would get ready for her son to see their new home.

She planned to show Billy their new home, with the office downstairs, facing Main Street. Then, she would take them upstairs to look at their new home. She would show her son how close he was to his grandfather's office, and she would show Orrin and Evie the results of her renovating the older building, which had been in danger of becoming an eyesore, and turning it into a beautiful and welcoming home for her and Billy.

She glanced at the microwave's clock. 'Imagine, Stephen, I am early.' She had twenty minutes to wait before they were to arrive. They would tour her home and go to Inez's. Purposefully, she all but skipped down the stairs; she needed to be excited and cheerful about the office and apartment above it if she wanted Billy to accept living here. She stumbled on the last step at the thought of Billy.

Her bounding steps became slow as she forced herself across the room. Please, she prayed as she looked out the office window for Orrin's car, let him like it. Let him not be scared here. I couldn't bear it, if

I gave up the house Stephen I built, if I left my neighbors and friends, if I moved to be near Stephen's parents and their offer to help, and Billy remained scared... Please, God, please, Stephen, I couldn't bear it if I made this move, and he is still scared of being with me.

How can he be scared to stay with me? He doesn't have those dreams when he stays with Orrin and Evie, only with me. Why?

She walked out the front door and turned to inspect her new home. Hopefully, it looked warm and cheerful to Billy.

"Hola, Senora Travis."

Mary didn't jump out of her skin, but it was only because she recognized the voice. "Inez!" she responded, hoping she sounded normal.

"Lo sent. I did not mean to startle you. I was wondering how the renovations were going."

"I am not going to talk to you if you insist on calling me Senora Travis. It's Mary."

"Si, I know. I will remember," Inez smiled up at the blonde woman. She looked a lot better than she had a few days ago. "I like your haircut."

"You don't think it's too short. I've always worn it long." Mary patted her hair selfconsciously.

"No... this is a good length for you."

"Thanks. You've made me feel better. I only hope Billy recognizes me. He was asleep by the time I got finished here yesterday, and I left before he woke up. So, he hasn't seen it yet."

"He might not recognize you," Inez laughed at Mary's horrified expression. "You look wonderful. He will think his mother is the most beautiful woman in the world."



"At his age, all children think their mother is the most beautiful woman in the world."

"So, you have nothing to worry about," Inez said, studying her new neighbor's face. Poor woman to be widowed so young. "When are you going to be ready to move in?"

"The contractors have finished all the major work, and I have spent the week cleaning and painting. And, cross your fingers, the furniture is supposed to arrive on Tuesday. Tonight is the sneak preview."

"I am sure they will think it is absolutely lovely."

Mary turned to the only woman she knew in this town, who did not live with Orrin or work with him. Words fell quickly out of her mouth; she desperately needed someone to talk with. "You know, I think Evie and Orrin are a bit put out with me," Mary tried to grin, but failed. "They think I am not being a good mother. I'm not. I love Billy more than anything. Of all the things Stephen and I did, Billy is the best. It's just that when Stephen died, there was so much to do."

"I was busy, and I didn't have time for Billy. Orrin and Evie took him after the funeral. It was supposed to be for a couple of weeks, but when they brought him back to me, he went all but catatonic. It wasn't just at the house. He was that way at the park and the school, everywhere we went. At night, he screamed and screamed. They brought him back here with them. I kept thinking, give him time; he'll get better. He hasn't. The psychologist says he's scared to be with me in Carson City. She says he's afraid I can't keep him safe. She thinks he'll be better here. "What if he doesn't get better? What if he doesn't want to ever let me be his mother again?" Mary bit into her knuckle, unaware she had done so until Inez reached up and pulled her hand away from her mouth.

Inez impulsively pulled Mary into a hug. "Don't worry," she said. She wanted to say more, but she felt Mary stiffen, and out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Judge Travis, his wife, and their grandson heading their way. She let Mary pull away and watched her as she hid away her fear and worry and put a smile on her face.

"I must get back to the restaurant. I will see you shortly."

"Thanks for listening. I didn't mean to just unload on you," she didn't mean to tell this woman her life history. She wasn't the sort of person who did things like that. It was just that she didn't have anyone to talk to except for Orrin and Evie. When she talked to them, she felt as though she were asking them to protect her and make everything better. She was a collegeeducated, adult woman and needed to stand on her own two feet. She couldn't start running to Orrin and Evie every time she got scared.

Inez turned and smiled, "That's what friends are for, and you and I will be friends, si?" "Yes. Yes, I think we will."

"Good. Tell your son I have made a delicious chocolate cake, and if he eats his dinner, I will give him a piece with ice cream and chocolate sauce."

Mary waved her away and, turning, knelt on the sidewalk so she could look her son in the eye as he drew nearer. "Hey, want to see what I've been up to?" She reached out for his hand, and her heart all but broke when he reached for his grandmother's hand instead. Keeping a smile on her face, she said, "Want the grand tour?"



Nathan closed the file and stretched in his chair. He finished reading all the charts for the patients he would see in the morning. Nothing particularly challenging, but that was okay. It would take folks a while before they quit thinking of him as the boy who played basketball with the high school team and see him as a more than capable doctor. One of the problems of practicing in the same town in which he had grown up. On the other hand, all the patients he would see tomorrow were people he knew, if only in passing, from when he lived here. It should be easy to put them at ease and talk with them.

That was one of the hardest parts of medicine, relating to patients. Some doctors were never able to establish a rapport with their patients, and those were the ones whose names the six o'clock local news stations reported on for being sued for malpractice. No matter the verdict of the trial, the doctor was forever tainted.

Patients needed to feel their doctor was working with them, actively helping them get well, and was pleased to see them. The better the relationships between him and his patients, the

more honest they would be with him, which translated into his being able to accurately diagnose their problems and treat them appropriately.

He ran his fingertips across the top of the charts. This is what he missed in Birmingham. He saw too many patients to get to know them. They'd be put in a room, and he would read charts between rooms, go in to treat them, and then move on to the next patient. They needed him there; there were simply too many patients needing to be seen, but he knew if he stayed, he would have burned out quickly. He was a country doctor at heart and needed to know his patients. He probably would have been better suited to those days when doctors made house calls using a horse and buggy to get around. He wanted to see his patients as people first and not just as diseases waiting to be cured. As much as he would miss Birmingham, returning here was the best thing he could have done.

"You were right, Dad. This is my home. I'll give Gran and Gramps a call. Ask them to come for a visit at Easter or something," he grinned when he realized he was talking to himself, and then shrugged. As long as Buck wasn't around to laugh, he could talk to himself and get away with it. At least he was an interesting conversationalist. He gathered the charts and smirked. He'd put the charts up, turn off the music, call them, then find out if Chris was still at Inez's and take him home if he was drinking, and if he wasn't, with luck, Chris would be willing to sit through another meal. After all, it was Buck's turn to cook today.

They could spend some time just talking. With everything going on, they barely said more than two words to each other. He was sure, if anyone saw him filing away charts, they would think him an idiot, grinning ear to ear like he was, but damn it felt good to be home. Life was good. It would be really good if he could find a way to tactfully suggest a different type of music to whoever was in charge of the music in the clinic. The thought of hearing Taylor Swift singing about her boyfriends, all day long, gave him a headache.

Besides, who, over the age of eighteen, liked to listen to that stuff? He had to admit, though, it had been a good idea on Emmett's part to wire the clinic for music. The music, like the huge saltwater aquarium in the waiting room, probably did a lot to soothe the nerves of anxious patients and family members.

It would have been a better idea to install a volume control in each of the rooms. Granted, they probably didn't play the music as he was playing it now, but there were times when music was entirely inappropriate. As far as he could tell, there wasn't any way to turn off the music for individual rooms. He'd talk to one of the nurses in the morning and find out about the sound system. Probably, there was a little button which would be incredibly obvious once someone showed it to him, and he would kick himself for not seeing it. Sort of like the time he ran the stop sign when his dad was teaching him to drive. 'Well, Dad, if I had seen it, I would have stopped.' His father had not liked his answer, no, not at all.

He laughed at the memory. His father, so incredibly patient in everything else, had been a maniac when teaching him to drive. He tried to, unsuccessfully, point out, he had been driving all over the ranch since his growth spurt left him tall enough to see out the windshield and reach the pedals at the same time. That didn't matter, according to Dad. There was a proper way to drive, and he was going to learn it. It had been hell, sitting beside his father in the old pick-up. Ten minutes into the lesson, his father would start raising his voice a bit and progress to yelling, 'watch it, watch it.' During the fourth lesson, he ran the stop sign because his dad was lecturing him about where his hands were supposed to be on the steering wheel. He had gotten out of the truck and told his dad to drive; he was not taking any more lessons from him, even if it meant he would never get his license.

Buck took over the lessons, and they had a great time. Buck never raised his voice, and once, the two of them drove all the way to Vegas to practice driving in city conditions; Buck even got them into see a show. By the time his sixteenth birthday rolled around, he had seen most of the state, driven in all sorts of weather, towed trailers, and changed flat tires. He told Buck he knew how to change a tire, but Buck said changing tires at the ranch was a lot different than changing one in the rain, wearing his Sunday best, alongside the highway, keeping an eye out for any motorist who might not see him. He never admitted it, but Buck had been right; it was a lot different.



He didn't lean against the window; he stood stiff-legged and straight-backed, his arms clasped lightly behind him, staring out the window. He wanted to lean against something or preferably sit or lie down, but doing so would be one step away from admitting he was in trouble. He hurt, but he could deal with the pain. He was starting to cough, but he doubted it was serious enough to prevent him from stopping Moore. No, rephrase that. He would not let his discomfort, pain if you will, or his illness keep him from dealing with Moore. He could handle his pain and illness. His problem was: his brothers were giving him a case of nerves. First, Larabee and Dr. Jackson showed up asking after him and Vin. What did they want? He gave the money back. He left the ranch, and he would not bother them again. So, why were they looking for him, and what should he do about it?

He straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin. He would have to talk to them, see what they wanted. Honor demanded they meet. He stole from them after all, and they were entitled to their anger. He just thought, and this he knew was what was causing him his anxiety, Chris was going to keep things quiet and cover for him. He thought Mr. Larabee to be a man true to his word. He gave every sign he would not tell the others the true reason he left, but he must have.

There was simply no other reason they would be searching for him. It had been a long time since he had misread someone so completely, and he couldn't even blame or worry about his mother or his physical discomfort as reasons for not properly reading Larabee.

He had felt comfortable and slipped up. In his profession, comfort was synonymous with danger. He wanted to believe that, for once ... he shook the thought off. He couldn't go there; it would make him weak.

He licked his lips and stopped himself from chewing on his bottom lip, a nervous habit he had not entirely managed to overcome. His 'brothers' were on their way, and if they were looking to extract their pound of flesh, he wasn't in the shape to prevent it. He needed to leave. Now, not in the morning, but now. Vin Tanner was a bounty hunter; he knew how to find people. Chances were Monica left him an easy trail to follow.

He expected them, at any moment, to descend on Sophie's home demanding justice. As much as he didn't want to leave this unexpected refuge, he needed to go before they arrived, if he planned to take care of Moore anytime soon. Besides, his staying here with Sophie endangered her and Monica.

He didn't think Moore would come here looking for him, and so the danger to the ladies from that direction was minimal, as was the danger from his brothers. However, his car, hidden under a tarp in the backyard, might as well have a neon arrow pointing to it. As well as Sophie thought she hid the car, in this neighborhood, with the kids running through everyone's backyards, it was only a matter of time before the Porsche was noticed and remarked on.

Once someone recognized its worth, lowlifes would start crawling out of the woodwork, and one of the ladies, if not both, would get hurt. It was time to leave. He had a plan; he knew where to go and what to do when he got there. He had nothing to gain by staying.

He looked around the room, seeing all the feminine touches; these were kind women, and he wished there was some way he could repay them for their generosity. Later, when his mother was safe, he would return and see what he could do. He picked up his suitcase, managing not to wince, and walked out the door.



When Mary began the grand tour, she explained she would use the front office to write. It was small and only the large window kept the room from feeling claustrophobic, but a large desk could fit in it. The multiple file cabinets were tucked out of sight in another very small room. The larger room would be used as a backdrop when she made her social media posts.

Evie Travis listened to Mary's description of the purpose for each room, and when Billy's attention was on his mother, she slipped away to head to the upstairs bathroom. If she stayed with the tour, Billy's hand would stay in hers and not in his mother's. She had become too much of the child's world. 'How,' she asked her reflection as she brushed through her snow-white hair, 'did we let it get to this point?' We should have made Mary see sense months ago.' She was here

now, but she was still throwing up roadblocks to her son moving in with her. It wasn't a question of love; it was a question of fear.

Mary lived in fear, and like Billy, suffered her own set of nightmares. Only, she didn't dream of her husband being killed in front of her eyes. She dreamed of her son rejecting her, refusing to be around her. She dreamed of his clear fear of living with her. And she dreamed of one day finding her son's body as she had her husband's.

Putting on a fresh coat of lipstick, Evie listened to the group head up the stairs. Mary's voice, too loud and too perky, resonated through the apartment as she showed it off. She sounded excited and hopeful. Yet, Evie would be willing to bet Mary would come up with another excuse to avoid putting Billy to the test of living with her.

The poor girl was scared, and she understood Mary's fear. She truly did. But Mary made things a lot harder on herself than she needed. Case in point, the vacation she and Molly planned for Orrin was supposed to have been for just the two of them. She and Orrin would have had time alone, and Mary and Billy would have had time to practice being a family before they moved into the apartment.

As far as she could tell, it had been a win-win situation. Everyone would have gotten what they needed. Mary had been very agreeable, seemingly recognizing both Orrin's need to get away and her need to spend some quality time with her son. Then, at the last moment, Mary balked; Billy had never been to New York, and every child should see the museums and the Statue of Liberty. If they took him, then she could get so much done on the apartment.

Soft-hearted Orrin agreed. Billy needed to see the city, and so the vacation she planned, with long days of doing nothing and romantic evenings in the best restaurants, became a vacation of hurried activities designed to entertain and amuse a six-year-old. Gripping about taking her grandson on vacation made her seem like an evil, old witch, so she kept her mouth shut, but darn it, Orrin had needed to get away.

Was she the only one who saw how tired he looked? The past year had taken its toll on her husband, first with Stephen's death and then with the death of Landon, his best friend. He put up a brave front of carrying on and buried himself in his work. His refusal to deal with his grief kept her up at night, worrying. Orrin's face aged overnight, and his laugh all but disappeared. Even the time he spent playing with Billy stressed him; she could see it in his eyes, too often those times brought back memories of their son. She nagged him about seeing the doctor and getting something to help him with his grief, but whenever she mentioned going to see Emmett, he'd just pat her hand, mumble he was fine, and walk off.

She supposed he meant to reassure her, but he failed miserably. If he had another heart attack and died, she would be alone. How could she bear living if both her husband and son were dead?

"Evie?" The voice of her beloved called her. She almost giggled at the concern for her in his voice. He knew she was put out; she wanted Mary to take Billy out for supper, and for the two of them to snuggle up together under a blanket, with a pizza and a good movie. He also knew he was the one responsible for them being here, acting as a safety net for Mary and Billy. He knew she didn't think them playing buffer was helping the situation. She could hear in his voice, he felt bad about changing her plans for their evening. She would probably hear the doorbell in the morning; it would be the florist with an expensive bouquet of exotic flowers Molly ordered in his name.

In the meantime, the old softie apparently planned to win her over with his sweet smile. She almost wished she could bop him on his head once or twice and get him to understand why she was put out. Sure, she made plans for their evening, and sure, he changed them, but she was put out not because of not getting to spend the evening alone with him.

Smartest man in the world, able to see all sides in any given situation, but he couldn't see that Mary and Billy needed time to get to know each other again. They needed to practice being a family of two because, no matter how much they all wished differently, Stephan was gone. Heck, they all needed to revert to their proper roles. Billy needed his mother and his grandparents. He did not need his grandparents acting as though they were his parents. Orrin, so smart in so many ways, did not understand that they needed to step back and let Mary be a mother.

"Evie?" he called again. She knew she worried him by not answering immediately, and she kicked herself for doing so. He did not need to be worried about her, not with everything else burdening him.

"I'll be out in a minute," she called back to him. She checked her reflection one last time and stuck her tongue out at herself, a habit she developed early in life when she realized she was never going to be beautiful. The best anyone ever would say when they saw her bemoaning her plainness was that she had a clear complexion and good bones. Having the good bones paid off. Many of her 'beautiful' friends were now looking old and worn. Her hair had gone white, skipping the grey part; she had few lines and looked at least several years younger than she actually was. Overall, she was happy with her appearance.

She opened the door, almost bumping into Orrin. Smiling, he steadied her by gently grabbing her shoulders when she stepped back rather than bumping into him.

"Wipe that smile off, Orrin." he wasn't smiling because he had just scared ten years off her, but because he knew she had stuck her tongue out at her reflection before leaving the bathroom. Sometimes being married to an observant man like Orrin was a real pain in the neck. He noticed everything she did and remembered everything she said, but he never saw her as too short or too flat-chested, and he never saw the scrawny woman she saw in the mirror.

He claimed he couldn't see the flaws she fretted over and over the years, and she had come to realize he truly didn't. When he said she looked beautiful, he meant it, which was nice, unless she wanted his honest opinion about a new hairstyle or a new dress. He would say 'lovely,' she would say 'thank you,' and then she would go in search of someone with more discriminating taste. Years ago, that someone had been Stephen; that child could be counted on to give his totally honest opinion about anything. Lord, she missed her son.

"Are you feeling all right?" his voice was pitched just Landon enough that Mary and Billy would be able to hear it from the office. She knew he was giving her an out, and they could make their excuses and go home, and she appreciated the effort, but they were here. Maybe he was right, and their presence would help Mary with her nervousness around Billy.

"I'm fine," she smiled up at him, and knew she had said the right thing when he visibly relaxed.

"Hungry?" he asked, and she marveled, his voice still had the power to send chills up and down her spine.

She slipped her hand into his and squeezed it. "I am starving."

They walked down the stairs to the front office, her hand in his. Mary was sitting at the desk with Billy on her lap, coloring. Evie said to Mary, "The place looks beautiful. Billy, I missed seeing your room. Can you show me it before we go eat?"

"Sure," and his little hand grabbed hers, and he tugged her back up the stairs to his new room, painted white with blue stripes. For several minutes, they examined the room. He showed her where his bed was going and the long built-in bookcase on which he would have room for not only his books but his favorite toys. He even let her sit down at his new desk and turned the light on so she could see he wouldn't hurt his eyes by reading in the dark.

Evie looked up from the desk and smiled at her grandson, "You are going to have so much fun doing your homework here." It would be all right, she wanted to say to Mary and Billy both. Instead, she gave her grandson a big hug, one of the bone-crushing, mama bear hugs that meant I love you so much I can't stand it. A kiss on the top of his head, then she pushed away from the desk. Holding out her hand, she asked, "Are you ready to go eat?"

"Yeah," he yelled, enjoying how the apartment, with so many rooms devoid of furniture, all but echoed. Hand in hand, they hurried down the stairs and joined the others waiting patiently by the door.

Orrin handed her coat to her, and she slipped it over her shoulders as she stepped out into the cold November wind. "Orrin, isn't that Chris?" She didn't give her husband a chance to answer and waved at the son of her dearest friend. Cassie had been dead more years now than she had been alive, but Evie saw her every time she looked at Chris.

Chris looked up and either grimaced or smiled at the sight of them standing there. She was sure he would have come over and allowed her to introduce him to Mary and Billy, but a truck pulled up alongside him and with the briefest of nods in their direction, he got in.



Nathan put the phone back in its cradle. The joy in his eyes a few short minutes ago had been replaced by a sadness that seeped into his bones. If he believed in aliens and such, he could easily think his sweet grandmother had been replaced by a pod-person. The things she said were no different than what she voiced when he went to say his goodbyes. He hoped having a couple of days to reflect on her tone would soften her anger, or if not that, then, he hoped his grandfather would have interjected a few kind words into his grandmother's tirade. Neither occurred.

The things she said about him, not knowing anything about love and loyalty to his real family, cut deep. He never got a word in between her accusations. She said he sold out his people for money, for Landon Larabee's millions. His people? Who were they? Black people? He was half white. Sure, he looked black, but he wasn't any more black than he was white. What did the woman want? Did she expect him to turn his back on his brothers and return to Alabama?

He scrubbed his eyes with his hands, wanting to cry, but real men don't cry; they just bury the hurt deep. That woman, his grandmother, had she ever loved him, or had she only pretended to love him to wound his father? What had his father done to them, except to love their daughter?

He had been excited to meet them. Going to Birmingham for his internship and residency had been hard: a new city, a tough workload, and being without his father and brothers made him desperate for family. And there they were, loving and kind, waiting for him with open arms.

An image of Gramps came to his mind. Gramps, with his tool kit, was fixing the leaky faucet in the bathroom when the super had promised to get to it for over a week, and he had been too busy to do anything more than let it keep him up during the few hours of sleep he managed to squeeze into his schedule. Another familiar image, one of Gramps, sitting in the rocker on the back porch with his great-grandkids all around listening to one of his tall tales, made him smile. Gran would stick her head out the door and listen a bit and go back into the kitchen, noisy with her daughter and three daughters-in-law. They seemed so full of love, then. What happened? Where did all this hate come from?

Nathan stopped his musings, and his head shot up. He wasn't sure what he heard, but whatever it was, it didn't belong. "Emmett? Is that you?" he called out. His voice echoed in the empty clinic. He reached into his pocket for his cell phone even as he told himself he would never hear the end of it if the only thing the sheriff found was a scared kitten on the roof.

The phone resting lightly in his fingers, he called out again, "Emmett?" He listened but heard nothing else. He pocketed his phone and listened again. He heard nothing. Still, he thought, 'he best check it out.' He lived in Birmingham for too many years to ignore an out-of-place sound.

Nathan searched around his office for something he could use as a weapon. A quick search of the desk gave him a letter opener. Testing the weight and feel of it in his hand, he stood up and walked into the hall.



Chris pushed aside the remnants of the cheesecake that Inez insisted he try when she saw he wasn't planning on heading back to the ranch anytime soon. She didn't need to twist his arm; he loved cheesecake, and the only sweets to be had at the ranch came from the supermarket freezer. He picked up the check and looked at it.

Garrett paid for the meal and so he had only the coffee and the cake to pay for. He dug a ten out of his billfold and dropped it on top of the less-than-generous tip Garrett left; the waitress had been attentive without being a nuisance and deserved more than the fifteen percent gratuity Garret calculated and left under an emptied water glass.

Besides, being a waitress was hard work with little money to show at the end of the day. He tossed another five onto the pile. He knew Anita's family, and knew some of the money would go to help her mama pay rent.

Chris almost smiled as he paid the bill. He managed to waste the afternoon away. He would have to get up before the chickens and help Buck before he and Vin headed down to Vegas. A friend of Vin's called right after Vin left for the motel in Ely. His friend left a message saying Tommy Botello would talk to them at one o'clock. He had gone on to say not to be late, because tardiness made Botello angry, and to act real respectful as if they wanted his help.

Respectful, even grovel.

Like hell he would grovel, well maybe he would, but only if the man had Ezra waiting in the office. Respectful? Maybe? He'd have to meet the man first, decide whether he was a man to respect. He would be cordial, he told Buck. Polite even, but that was all.

He'd remember to call and check in on Junior, not like him to not show. He must have had a big fight with his daddy. If what Garrett said about him being the yardstick by which the Marks boys were measured, then, Uncle Curtis owed his sons apologies. Though if he had Alzheimer's, he supposed it was too late for Uncle Curtis to make things right.

Neither Buck nor Nathan ever understood why he had anything to do with his cousins, and he knew his continued association with them hurt his brothers. He never meant to hurt them. As a kid, he visited the Marks because his uncle would tell him about his mother, something his dad never did. Uncle Curtis pulled out old photo albums and told the story behind each picture making him feel close to a mother he couldn't remember. Somewhere along the line, in between hearing about the time she fell off the roof and broke her arm and finding her secret hide-out, complete with a box full of stories she wrote and pictures she drew, going to see his cousins became a habit.

Slipping his wallet into his back pocket, Chris stepped out into the cold. Across the street, Orin and Miss Evie were waiting for a tall blonde to lock the door to the newly renovated Baxter Building, except now, if the little sign on the door was right, it was the Mary Travis Building. A little boy clung to Miss Evie's hand, and Chris had to think a moment before he realized the boy must be their grandson, Billy, and the woman their daughter-in-law.

Hard to believe Stephen was dead. They had been friends of a sort throughout high school, but their friendship faded when they went to different colleges. He hadn't been surprised to hear Stephen had gone into journalism, but he had been surprised to hear the man had married. Stephen had been so passionate about his work. Chris figured there wasn't any room in his life for a wife. He and Sarah had been invited to the wedding, but Sarah was too far along in her pregnancy to travel safely; they sent their gift of a silver platter by way of Landon. Funny, all these years and he had never met Stephen's wife. Buck mentioned, she had moved to Four Corners and talk was she was going to write a blog from Four Corners.

He debated walking over to introduce himself when Miss Evie waved at him. Orrin and Miss Evie had been great friends of his father, and he supposed he ought to speak to them. He didn't think he should appear rude, but they were having a family moment, and he was not part of their family, no matter what Miss Evie thought. If he joined them, he would be intruding, and Orrin and Miss Evie would ask him about how things were working out with his brothers. He didn't want to intrude, and he didn't want to have to answer any questions about his brothers. He definitely did not want to explain how he managed to chase off one of them. He wasn't particularly worried about having violated the terms of his father's will. Nor was he worried about what Orrin would say. He just didn't think any of this was Orrin's business. He was saved from being rude when a truck pulled up beside him.



Vin sang along with the song on the radio, his fingers tapping out the beat on the steering wheel. He'd give the song a ten for danceability and a two for subject matter. He was not old, and he was not a prude, but some of the words he found himself saying as he sang along with the radio were not fit for decent folk. He grinned at himself, good thing he wasn't decent folk, or he'd have a hard time finding something to sing along with.

Pulling out onto Main Street, an original, never-before-heard-of name for a street, he slowed down as he drove straight through the center of town. The street had four lanes and a turn signal at a couple of intersections, but at this time of day (or night), it was almost deserted, and he was able to travel down the street at a crawl, memorizing the names and locations of the stores. The Sleepy Hollow Inn, situated on the outskirts of the town and across from the newly built Post Office, marked the beginning of the town. They were separated from the rest of town by a small park, and Vin thought the separation proper, as both the motel and the Post Office, with their bright light and modern-looking exteriors, clashed with the old buildings making up the rest of town. Without the cars, and without the electric lights shining through the windows, and

especially without people standing around talking into their little phones, the town looked as though it had escaped from a history book.

Driving through Four Corners made him feel transported back to the turn of the century. Cane-back chairs and rockers dotted the sidewalks, and he could easily imagine old geezers spending their day in those chairs, talking about how things were when they were young. One store even had a checkerboard setting on a barrel ready for someone to start a game. Scrubbedclean windows and glass doors bore, in big white letters, the name of each establishment, none of that neon light stuff.

Trees and lampposts rose out of the sidewalks, offering shade for the bright days and soft yellow light for the black nights. The sidewalks themselves were free of the debris that accumulated throughout the day when shoppers dropped things as they moved from store to store. He suspected each store owner ended their day by sweeping the sidewalks in front of their place; either that or the people of Four Corners took the bit about cleanliness being next to godliness to heart. Maybe something about living in this wide-open country made the inhabitants take care of it.

He grinned a bit to himself as he passed the Judge's office, thinking about the first time he drove down Main Street when things were a little more hectic. Bumper-to-bumper traffic with every car searching for one of the too few parking places lining Main Street. Molly, the judge's secretary, said something about a meeting at the town hall causing the chaos. The traffic, if nothing else, pulled Four Corners into the modern century. He'd have to photograph the place one Sunday evening soon, before someone decided to increase their trade by adding a neon sign or two.

Spotting a familiar figure in black coming out of Inez's restaurant, he slowed even further. Being in a better mood than he had been that morning, he rolled down the window to wave at his blond brother. He pulled up to the curb, and his brother jogged the few steps over to his truck.

"Small world," Vin greeted Chris cheerfully. He'd had a Landon's day, aching most every minute of it, but he could smile because he figured Chris ached a lot more than he did, and was too stubborn to show it.

"Smaller still if Nate's still at his office. We need to let him know this coming Saturday; he's going to be in the saddle all day long. I might even mark his calendar for him so he can't say he forgot."

"Use big letters."

"In red and underlined," Chris agreed. Nathan was not going to wiggle out of this.

"Good," Vin replied, thinking he would be the one laughing next weekend, not Nathan. Let's see how he liked hearing from every muscle each time he even considered moving. That took care of Nate, and he'd have to think of some suitable revenge for Buck, but since he and Chris were conspiring together against Nate, did that mean Chris was now untouchable? No, it didn't. Not at all. He inwardly smirked where Chris couldn't see and gestured to the passenger side. "Get in, I'll drive you."

Chris's eyes narrowed as he walked around the front of the truck and climbed in. Vin was plotting. He could tell. He was plotting against him. Why?

"You took all the hot water," Vin answered Chris's unspoken question. "That just wasn't right. Stealing all the hot water when you knew your brothers needed it, that's pert near unforgivable."

"Would it help to apologize?" Chris grinned. It might be the good meal influencing his mood, but somehow being with this brother made him feel better. He could see the devil in his brother's eyes and knew, without a doubt, there would be some sort of payback for his using up all of the hot water.

"No. The time for apologizing has long since passed. If you had any decency in you, you would have thought ahead and not done it in the first place."

Chris leaned back in his seat and sighed dramatically. Vin might be thinking up some devious revenge, and he'd probably just take whatever Vin dished out because he simply was not good at thinking up pranks, but if Vin planned on doing something to Buck, then the next few weeks would be mighty entertaining for the rest of them. As a kid, Buck had proved to have the

imagination to be a master of pranks. Unfortunately, for Vin, Buck had a long memory and had never quite grown up. He ducked his head to hide the amusement in his eyes and asked, "You going to get this piece of junk out of the middle of the road?"

"As soon as you put your seat belt on."

Chris made a show of looking at his seat belt and then slowly running his eyes down the road to the clinic. "We are going less than two blocks."

"My piece of junk, my rules. This piece of junk does not move until everyone has a belt on. 'Sides that's Judge Travis standing over there, and I'd hate to be breaking the law of the land in front of him."

Chris looked at his brother and burst out laughing at the grimace his brother made. He put on the seat belt and motioned Vin forward.



Nathan straightened from the fighting crouch; he had sunk into it as he searched the clinic. Nothing. He was being paranoid. There was no one in the clinic, nothing out of place, and more importantly, he had not heard another sound. He had been spooked by the silence of the place, and at his age, which was ridiculed. One thing was for sure: he wasn't telling anyone about this. Buck would have a field day teasing him.

It wasn't anything, he told himself again as he walked back into his office. All buildings made unexplained noises, only most noises were hidden by the sounds of people talking or radios and televisions blaring. The clinic probably made noises all afternoon, but with the music on so Landon, he hadn't noticed.

He thrust the letter opener back into the drawer and slammed the drawer shut. He laughed nervously at the image he must have made, letter opener in hand, searching the empty exam rooms one by one. Who did he think he was, chasing after an imagined intruder? Sure, he could take care of himself. You didn't grow up one of the Larabee boys without learning how to defend yourself.

Their Dad had been a firm believer that boys needed to know how to fight. He taught them how to handle a gun, how to hold a knife, and how to use their fists. Then, he told them only an idiot fought, and he expected them to stay out of trouble. Being the obedient son, he listened to his father and never entered into a fight, not one. Although his size and his brothers' reputations may have been the reason for him staying out of trouble, not because of any advanced negotiating skills he developed.

He listened to his father about not fighting, but he couldn't say the same about his brothers. Too often, one or the other would come home with bruised faces and bruised knuckles. The reasons varied, but they boiled down to two main ones. Buck needed to be every girl's champion, and Chris, well, Chris just had a hot temper. Not that Chris ever went looking for trouble; he didn't. He just didn't back down. Chris never learned the fine art of talking things out, as evidenced by the current situation.

Nathan gathered up his things, still laughing at himself, now he was over his fright. He took one last look around the clinic and grabbed his winter coat, thinking he needed another coat. The one he held was fine for an Alabama winter, but when the snow and ice hit here in Nevada, he would freeze. Dropping his phone into his pants' pocket, he pulled his coat on and headed out the back door. He opened it, armed the alarm, and walked out onto the small porch Emmett installed at the rear of the clinic when his nurses decided to make the clinic smoke-free.

Checking the door to make sure it was locked, he looked around, vaguely shocked by how dark it had become. November did mean the days were shorter, but he hadn't meant to work all afternoon. Glad he hadn't mentioned his plans to Chris about meeting up with him, and then, the two of them helping Buck with the evening's chores.

The dark skies meant he needed to apologize to Buck for spending the whole afternoon at the clinic. He hoped Chris managed to get back to the ranch in a timely manner. He'd get up early and do a few chores before heading out in the morning.



This was different from the vandalism and petty theft he and Thaddeus had done before. All Thad had talked about over the last few days was the need to break into the clinic and rifle

through the supply closet. It stood to reason, he said, since veterinarians carried drugs in their clinics that Emmett Griggs was bound to carry more and better drugs.

Tuesday night, they drove into town to take a good look at the place. The parking lot, situated behind the clinic, was all but invisible from the street. They could take their time once they were in and search the place thoroughly, not only looking for drugs, but for the cash Dr. Griggs was sure to have in the office and anything they could sell.

When they drove around the clinic and saw lights on, Andy wanted to call the robbery off, but Thad insisted they go through with it. Andy glanced at his older brother. Thad had been in the same wreck that took their Ma's life and put their Pa in a wheelchair. He looked and acted fine most of the time, but when the doctors refused to renew his prescription for the painkillers, they put him on after the wreck, he began driving to Ely a couple of times a week. He searched the dangerous parts of town, filled with unsavory people wanting to buy something, anything, to find the relief from pain, he thought he still needed.

At first, he told himself, he went along with his brother to keep him out of serious trouble, but he readily admitted, there was a thrill to knocking over a gas station or an all-night diner. Seven times, the two of them walked into a place with their black ski mask-covered faces, demanding that the frightened attendant open the cash register. At the diner, they used a rope to tie up the middle-aged woman, and before they left, they each ate a slice of pie from the display on the counter. She cried as they ate. They weren't rolling in dough, but the money funded Thad's visits to Ely with a little leftover to help when their father's disability check didn't quite cover the bills. His and Thad's bouts with larceny meant neither of them had to leave school to get a job. Not that staying in school played any part in their decision to walk on the wild side. It just gave them the respectability they needed to not become suspects.

After hitting the gas station out on Pike's Road, Thad counted their money and claimed they needed to look for something more lucrative. His brother insisted they needed to go through with their plan. If there was someone actually in the clinic, they had rope and they had the gasoline can in the back, they could use to scare whoever was inside. They told Pa they needed to get gas so they could mow the yard in the morning; Pa didn't seem to realize it was November, and the grass wasn't growing.

After Thad ran up to try the clinic's door, he returned to the car, announcing there was someone in there. If it was a doctor, he was bound to have a lot of money on him, which would be a bonus. Andy agreed, and after a few minutes of discussion, he pulled the ski mask down over his face and got out of the car with the rope and a backpack. Thad moved the car into another building's parking lot. In a couple of minutes, he jogged up with the gasoline can in his hand; there wasn't much in it, but the fear of burning was bound to make the person in the clinic cooperative. They waited, dark shadows near the porch.



Vin rested his arms along the top of the steering wheel. "Looks like he's already left." The clinic looked dark and empty. He leaned back in his seat and stretched. He was tired and eating supper, and then hitting the sack was looking more and more like a good way to end the day. "I'll take you back to your car, and then I'm grabbing something at McDonald's," his voice trailed off as he took a second look at the alley leading behind the clinic. "Something's wrong," he hissed to Chris as he, in one fluid move, flung open the door and grabbed his rifle from its rack in the back.

Chris didn't bother to question what his brother saw. He did not see anything himself, but he heard Nathan's yell, and it didn't sound as though he were particularly happy. Vaulting over the hood of the truck, he ran down the dark alley at Vin's side.



Though he couldn't pinpoint why, Nathan knew the moment he pulled the door closed and thus locked it, he had made a mistake in coming outside. He belatedly realized he had been safe in the clinic. Now, the door was locked, and he didn't want to turn his back on whatever it was causing the hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end, to unlock it.

He cursed himself for all kinds of a fool. This very situation was the reason Emmett put in the alarm system-Junkies. He peered into the shadows, trying to see what his mind knew to be hiding in them. Was that two people or three? "Come on out now, no sense hiding like that. I can

see you; you know. Let's talk a minute," come on he prayed. If I can see you, I can figure out what to do. I need to know how high and desperate you are. Please, Lord, don't let them hear anything in my voice to set them off. Stay calm, Nathan. "All right, I am going to walk down these steps, and then I am going to my car. I suggest you leave."

He licked suddenly dry lips when the men in the shadows did not react to his talk. He should have made the call to the police when he had the chance. It was far better to look foolish than it was to look dead. If he had his cell phone in his coat pocket, he could do like they were always doing on TV and secretly hit 911 and have the operator hear what was happening. But he, for some reason, put his phone in his pants' pocket when he put on his coat.

He had three options as far as he could tell. Turn his back on them and try to get into the clinic before they charged his unprotected back. Stay where he was and hope they didn't come up onto the porch. Go down the steps and meet them.

He was six-four and in better-than-average condition. He had been taught to fight by his father and grew up practicing what he learned from his Dad on his two brothers. His best option was out in the open, where his height and long arms would give him the advantage-- as long as they didn't have guns.

Surely, if they had guns, they would have said something by now. They probably didn't even have a weapon. He, more than likely, surprised a couple of teenagers thinking about breaking in. If he didn't corner them, chances were, they'd bolt the minute they thought they could get away from him without him seeing their faces. Monday morning, they'd probably show up in the clinic claiming to be in some sort of pain, asking for their drug of choice.

He took the first step and then the second. He was on level ground, and he could see the shapes moving, morphing into human forms. Two, he thought, almost sighing his relief. They were going to charge him, but it was only two of them. Only two. He could handle them.

On his third step, he felt the rope fall and tighten, pinning his arms to his sides. Moving on instinct, Nathan threw himself to the right, hoping to pull the son of a bitch on the other end of the rope off his feet.

Andy anticipated the doctor's move; calves tried it all the time. He braced his heels against the porch step and pulled back. He couldn't see the doctor because of the way he was braced, but the sound the man made as he hit the ground told him he succeeded. The doctor was roped and on the ground.

Nathan hit the ground hard, the impact bruising his side. Gasping in pain, he rolled to his back and kicked upward. Screw the Hippocratic Oath, I hope you lose both balls, he thought as his foot connected with his other attacker. The man howled and dropped to the pavement. One down, one to go.

Andy fought the pain in his thigh; he needed to keep tension on the rope. He could feel the muscles in his arms burn as they strained against the struggling man on the ground. Where was Thad? He needed Thad's help.



Nathan moved with the rope, smiling to himself when he felt it slacken some. Even with the rope around him, he had one man on the ground. Testing the slack in the rope, he almost crowed his relief; the roper didn't know much about keeping something roped. He was going to get out of this. He looked up, wanting to see his attacker on the other end of the rope. Damn, the word exploded in his mind as he first smelled the gasoline and then felt it splash on his face, running down his neck, under his coat to cover his back, chest, and right arm. He froze. The fumes burned; he wanted to claw at his eyes, but the rope tightened and pinned his arms to his sides.

"Be still," the one he kicked was breathing hard, but the second one approached him with a lighter in his hand. "We only wanted to get in and take a few things, but you are causing us all sorts of trouble." Nathan watched as the hand holding the lighter flipped it open and shut.

"Be still. I might have to see how bright a candle you make." Thad tossed the gas can down, unafraid of the noise it made as it hit the ground. "You a doctor?"

"Yes," Nathan snarled, when a man with his face covered by a ski mask dropped to the ground beside him. "

"We want your wallet, your keys, the usual." Thad sat back on his heels, studying the situation. "Tie off the end of the rope." He nodded when Andy pointed to the beam running along the porch. It looked to be about eight feet off the ground. Perfect. "Make sure it's tight; we don't want him thinking he can wiggle out of it. Good. Get the rope in the backpack and tie his hands.

Thad held up the lighter, showing Nathan the flame. "This here is how we are going to do this. My brother is going to tie your hands, then he is going to reach into your pockets and get your keys and your wallet. You have enough money in your wallet, we'll go. If not, we are going into the clinic and see what we can find. You try anything, I will set you on fire." Thad promised.



"You don't want to do this. You can stop this," Nathan spoke softly, less afraid now that the second kid, not a man but a kid, knelt between him and the one with the lighter. He had to calm things down, diffuse the situation.

"Shut up." The kid with the lighter didn't shout; he didn't have to. He thumbed the flint wheel and held the flame dangerously close to Nathan's face.

Thad tugged at the rope surrounding Nathan's wrist. Satisfied his brother had secured the man's hands, he pulled Nathan to his knees. "Get his keys and wallet." He commanded his brother. If the man so much as thought about moving, he planned to set his face ablaze. He trusted his brother could move fast enough to get out of the way.

"He has sixty dollars and a couple of credit cards. His debit card is for some bank in Alabama." Andy tossed the wallet on the ground. He wore gloves so he was not leaving any fingerprints behind on the wallet. He stood up and pulled the rope, circling Nathan's arms, up so it settled around his neck.

Thad nodded his approval of his brother's actions. Their life of crime was making it so much easier, knowing what the other needed and wanted. "Now that you have your leash on, we are going to go into the clinic, and you are going to show us around."

Nathan nodded. He managed to keep his eyes closed when gas splashed across his face, but he couldn't keep them from burning from the fumes and could only open them into slits. He stumbled as he was led to the steps. He stood on the steps as his keys were used to unlock the door. He felt better knowing they only had a few seconds to punch in the code before the alarm sounded. But they didn't move. He could feel the weight of the rope change. Nathan thought they were undoing it so they could drag him around the clinic. Luckily, the alarm was silent, and the police would be arriving shortly.

"Mr. Doctor, my brother and I can handle things from here, and we don't need you here in Four Corners trying to identify us." Thad pushed Nathan off the porch, letting the rope carry him away from the steps.

Nathan roared, "No!" as his feet began churning, trying to find something other than air on which to stand. The two brothers stood, side by side, watching as he struggled. The one with the lighter ran his thumb over the friction wheel every time Nathan swung close.

He couldn't breathe. His hands, without any conscious direction from his brain, reached for the rope around his neck. He clawed at the rope, trying to pull it away from his neck. He felt a nail tear away from its bed, but he didn't react to the pain. He couldn't breathe. One breath, please. One more breath. He needed more time. He needed time to say all the things he needed to say to his brothers. He needed time to set things right with his grandparents. He needed to know they had found Ezra and brought him home. He needed...

He needed one more breath. Please, just one more.



"OK, let's go over this one more time." Sheriff Harris had a pretty good idea of what happened, but he was a methodical man, taking one step at a time, so he didn't miss anything. He had talked to his deputy and briefly to Chris Larabee, but he wanted to hear the story one more time and make sure everything added up before he let the long-haired man with blazing eyes out of the handcuffs.

Vin glared at the sheriff. He knew the man was just doing his job, but it made him mad as hell to be the one in handcuffs while the bottom feeders disappeared into the night. He glanced at his brothers. Chris looked up to make sure he was all right. Although he hated being in handcuffs.

In another situation would have fought anyone attempting to put them on him, he nodded that he was, and Chris turned his attention back to Nathan. Please, Vin prayed, let Nathan be all right.

"There ain't much to tell," he sounded calm, but inside, he seethed. Here he was with handcuffs on him, explaining things to the sheriff, while his brothers needed him. He wanted to make a few choice comments, but forced himself to stay calm. Nathan needed Chris, and if he made a scene, Chris would be forced to leave Nathan's side.

"Name?"

"Vin Tanner. I am one of Chris and Nate's brothers," he looked to see if the sheriff planned on making any comments about him being one of Landon Larabee's bastards, but the sheriff didn't react. Either he knew all about Landon and his sons, or he had a master poker face. "I've been in Ely on family business, and I came back through town to drop off some mail. I saw Chris come out of Inez's Place, and I picked him up. We were going to check to see if Nathan was still working. The place looked locked up, so I started to drive off, but then I heard something. Reckon, Chris heard it too, cause we both jumped out of the truck and started running." He didn't say the rest. He didn't say how the feelings of dread and desperate urgency filled him as he left his truck and put wings on his feet as he all but flew down the dark alley. He didn't say how he knew, but without looking, he knew Chris was at his side, matching him stride for stride. He didn't say how part of him celebrated Chris's presence, for once, he had someone at his back. He didn't say when he turned the corner, he felt as though he had been thrown into an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. He didn't say it, but struck by the absurdity of seeing his brother hanging, he almost stumbled. Things like this were not supposed to happen anymore, and especially not to a good man like Nathan. He wanted to ask the sheriff why he let something like this happen, but he didn't.

"Why didn't you just drive? Wouldn't that have been quicker?"

"Nah. Maybe... maybe not. I would have had to back up and pull in. I don't remember thinking about it, just grabbed my rifle and ran."

"Why did you take a rifle?"

"Didn't think 'bout that either. Reckon, I figured things might be bad, and I might need it," he glowered at the sheriff, saying with his eyes, the man hadn't been there, so he best not be doing any judging.

"So, you and Chris ran down the alley and?"

"And there was Nathan. He was hanging and choking," Vin stopped in mid-sentence, struggling to get the rage and the fear he still felt under control.

"There were two men dressed up in black sweatshirts and black ski masks, standing on the ground in front of the porch, watching Nathan choke. Chris yelled and plowed right into them, knocking one to the ground, and maybe if I had too, we would have them here to answer our questions, but I thought, if we got into a slugfest, Nathan would choke to death. Reckon, Chris thought the same because he jumped over the one on the ground and grabbed Nathan's feet, holding him up to keep him from choking.

"The one who fell got to his feet, and the other one stood there next to Chris and Nathan. He had something in his hands, a lighter, and it hit me, the smell of gasoline was in the air." Vin let out a long sigh. "I shot that tree to get his attention, and he turned to look at me. He held a lighter up, so I could see the flame, and nodded towards Nathan. I took aim at him. If he made any move towards Nathan, I would have shot him. I would have hit him, but even a dying man could get lucky, and if he managed to touch Nathan with that flame..."

"You know, Chris had to have smelled the gas, and he had to see the bastard holding up the lighter, but he ran to Nathan, grabbed him by his legs, and held him, so he wasn't choking. I thought I was going to lose both of them...Ever seen anyone who's been badly burned?" "Yeah."

"I had a friend who got burned in an apartment fire."

"Do you need to sit?"

"No. Let me finish," Vin snuck another look over at his brothers. He wondered when the place had gotten so crowded. Deputies were mingling in the parking lot, and of course, paramedics were hovering over Nathan, and a blonde woman stood to the side, talking to an

older woman holding a little boy. Judge Travis's family, he identified them without wondering why they were there.

"I'm listening," the sheriff prompted.

"The one holding the lighter pulled a rag from his pocket and set it on fire. He kept staring at me. I wondered if he wanted me to shoot him, so he could justify throwing the rag on Nathan. I put my rifle on the ground.

"I don't know if he was relieved or disappointed when I put it down. I could be imagining it, the disappointment; his face was covered by the mask. He may have been stalling, giving the other man time to get their car, because when he heard the engine turn over, he took off running." Vin controlled the shudder that threatened to run through him at the thought of what could have been. The man backed away, becoming one with the shadows. He almost followed, but Chris was yelling at me to cut Nathan down.

"That's pretty much what happened. He left, Chris and me got Nathan cut down, and then the next thing I know, I picked up my rifle only to be tackled by your overly enthusiastic deputy."



Chris leaned his head back against the porch steps, his hand resting on Nathan's shoulder, and his eyes resting on Vin as Orrin Travis talked to Sheriff Harris and got the man to take the handcuffs off of Vin. His brother walked away from the two older men and snatched his rifle out of the deputy's hands, his eyes daring him to object.

Chris smirked when the deputy, showing more intelligence than he had earlier, when he tackled Vin, backed away and let Vin take the rifle. He watched as Vin approached them, and knowing Vin was there watching over things, he closed his eyes, wanting, if only for a moment, to escape the nightmare he found himself living. His eyes popped back open when, behind his lids, he saw his brother hanging, struggling to breathe. There was no escape.

"Travis called Dr. Griggs. He'll be here in a couple of minutes," Vin dropped to his haunches and told Nathan, who lay stretched out beside Chris, while the EMT, who looked like he wasn't quite old enough to drive, flushed his eyes.

"No need to go bother the man. I'm fine," Nathan groaned, but the hoarseness of his voice made a lie of his words.

"Nathan, hush," Chris ordered him. His brother didn't need to talk, and he certainly didn't want to hear him; his voice reminded him how close it had been. "We'll let Emmett decide if you need to go on to the hospital, and if he says you do, then you go. No arguing."

Nathan made a face at Chris, but the mask feeding him oxygen hid his defiance of Chris's dictum.

The EMT looked up from where he was checking Nathan's blood pressure, "Doc Griggs is coming? Good. Maybe he can make you go, Doc."

"He needs to go to the hospital?" Vin asked, not believing they were all sitting around on the parking lot's ice-cold ground. If Nathan needed to go to the hospital, they should load him up, turn on the siren, and go.

"He looks good. Vitals, I mean. I would just feel better running him into Eagle Bend and letting the ER doc check him out."

"Why don't you just put him in the ambulance?" Vin asked. It seemed like the obvious solution, and he wondered why no one had done just that.

"Doc says he doesn't need to go. I can't force him."

Vin frowned at the EMT, "Wasn't it just a few days ago you forced our brother, Ezra, to go?" That wasn't a question. They had all been there. Ezra hadn't wanted to go to the hospital, but he'd been taken, despite his protests.

Rather than taking offense at Vin's tone, a grin split Brad's face, and he laughed. "He's one of you Larabee brothers, too? Man, I sure hope I never have to take that man anywhere again. And for the record, it wasn't me or my partner who made him go. It was the Doc here," he chuckled at some thought, but didn't elaborate.

Nathan tried to chuckle at the memory, earning himself a frown from all three men when his chuckle turned into a cough. "Hush, Nate," Chris growled.





Billy's hand clutched in hers as they crossed the street put a smile on her face, and at that moment, she felt confident that everything would work out. Suddenly, the truck, which had been crawling along Main Street, screeched as brakes were stomped on. Two men jumped out of the truck and began running down the alley separating the town's clinic and the children's clothing store. Without thinking, she dropped Billy's hand and raced after the men. There was a story to be told; she could smell it. As she reached the truck, a shot rang out. The sound hurried her on. Intent on seeing what was happening, she never heard her son calling for her. The gunshot had been a siren calling her name, saying Fate was giving her an opportunity to prove her worth.

In hindsight, running down the street wasn't the smartest move she could have made, but Evie hadn't played it smart either, not when she allowed Billy to dart out of the door of the restaurant to chase after his mother. No, to blame Evie was wrong; there was no way Evie would have willingly let Billy be exposed to danger.

Damn, what kind of mother was she? Another easy answer- the worst kind. She never heard her son calling, as she ran down the alley. She heard nothing over the voice in her head, instructing her to get the story to prove she was an investigative reporter and not merely a pretty face.

Oh God, poor Billy. Honestly, God, she tried praying, she hadn't realized he followed her. If she had known, she would have done everything differently. She wouldn't have rounded the corner so quickly, startling the man with the rifle. He had spun around, pointing the rifle at her, freezing her in her tracks and causing Billy to scream. Orrin snatched the boy up, holding him against him as he stared down the man with the gun. The barrel of the gun lowered, pointing toward the ground, when a deputy ran past her and tackled the man.

Her brain registered what was happening, but her eyes were on her screaming son. She took him from her father-in-law and whispered words of reassurance to her son. It ripped her soul into pieces when Billy tore himself from her and flung himself into his grandmother's arms to be comforted. It was unfair of her to feel that way, especially considering all Evie had done for her and Billy, but, damn, why couldn't Evie have stayed away? A few minutes alone with her son, she could have calmed him down and explained to him she was all right. She could have held him until he understood she was unhurt, and everything would have been all right between them. But Evie showed up, panting and with her hair, which she had spent forever in the bathroom combing, had been a mess. Billy took one look at his grandmother and fled to her.

It hurt to have him turn from her, but she was unsure of how she could fix things, and she didn't have time at that moment to try to figure out what she should do. There was a man with a rifle, another man with a noose around his neck, and there was the man Evie waved to only a few minutes ago. And, all three men looked angry and dangerous, and she needed to talk to them to find out what had happened if she planned to get her story.

The thing was, she thought, as she swiped at a tear escaping from her control, she was doing her job, the same job Stephen had. No one looked at Stephen when he rushed towards danger, the way Evie looked at her.

Like her husband, she studied journalism. A school assignment caused her to cross paths with Stephen. After only a handful of dates, she concluded he routinely ran towards danger, if it meant getting the 'story.' She knew of the danger he put himself in. Even the birth of their son had not deterred him from his search for the truth and justice. Her husband was her mentor and the love of her life. How could she dishonor his memory by cowering in safety while others responded to the sound of the gunshot?

She had let herself become sidetracked by her foray into social media. She never planned to capitalize on her looks or her sense of fashion and style. She never planned on spending her life in front of a camera extolling the virtues of one mascara over another; it was supposed to be a temporary thing, a stopgap that paid the bills so Stephen could pursue his dreams. While Billy was young, she would care for their son and play at sharing her views on fashion and beauty. But



she was supposed to work with Stephen when Billy started school. Their plan was for her to investigate, hunt down stories, and expose the injustices of the world at her husband's side.

What kind of reporter would she be if she ignored the men jumping out of a truck only to leave it in the middle of the street while they ran down a dark alley? She reached the alley when she heard the sound of a rifle being fired. Without thinking, she followed the men, pulling her phone from her pocket and thumbing the photo app on.

She would not wait until the police secured the scene, making it safe, before checking things out? Stephen wouldn't have waited. So why was Evie looking at her like that?

Didn't Evie understand? That question was easy to answer. Evie didn't because of Billy. Not to blame him for following her, this wasn't his fault; it was hers, but why couldn't Evie see she needed to investigate the situation? It might be the story she needed to begin her new career.

Replaying the scene over in her mind, she snapped pictures of the chaos, doubtful any of them would be in focus, but using the phone's camera to chronicle the attack on the town's new doctor, the new black doctor. Was that the reason for the attempted lynching? He was black, and someone could not stand having a black doctor practicing medicine in Four Corners. She wasn't sure yet, but with the attempt at lynching the man, it was a line of questions she had to explore.

She pivoted around, trying to capture the people involved in looking for clues. She might as well fill her phone with crime scene photos; she wasn't going to be taking any family pictures over the dinner table tonight. Evie took Billy to Inez's, saying he needed to eat, go home, and get to bed. She hadn't asked Mary to join them, but Orrin said he would be joining them in a few minutes.

Two deputies pushed her back as they rolled the yellow crime scene tape around the parking lot, separating her from those involved in the crime. She couldn't hear the sheriff as he questioned the long-haired man from the truck. The ambulance, parked as it was, blocked her view of the doctor and the paramedics as they worked over him. Sighing in frustration, she pocketed her phone and waited for a chance to talk with someone, anyone, other than Orrin, who had easily been included with the investigators.

Her evening had been going so well. Billy seemed to like his room and had smiled at her several times as they toured their new home. A man, whom Evie identified as Chris Larabee, almost crossed the street to join them; instead, he had climbed into the pickup, which pulled up beside him, and now she had a career-making story to tell.



"Want to hand over the rifle, son?" Sheriff Harris had taken the handcuffs off the longhaired man at the insistence of Judge Travis, but he didn't like the idea of a loaded weapon, other than his own, being anywhere near him, and he cringed when his idiot deputy handed the angry man the rifle without first taking out the bullets.

The judge vouched for the man; he knew the Larrabee brothers, and his story sounded good, but it wasn't any reason to give him a loaded weapon. He and his deputy would talk later, after all the civilians were gone; no point letting anyone else hear what he was going to say to the man.

Vin moved away from Chris and Nathan. He had no plans to voluntarily hand over the rifle and wanted his brothers safely away from any potential conflict. "No."

Harris blinked a couple of times in surprise. Very few times in his thirty years in law enforcement had anyone so blatantly defied him, and to do so now, with the damn reporter woman recording everything, put him in a tough spot. He could force the man to turn over his rifle and look like a bully, or let the man keep it and look like a wimp.

With a jerk of his chin, he indicated for Vin to follow him over to a patrol car. When they stood facing each other, away from the others, he spoke in a low tone. "You know, if you had hit anyone when you fired that rifle, you'd be sitting in jail now."

"I know," Vin drawled, "if I hadn't fired, Nathan would probably be dead now. That son of a bitch was more than willing to let Nathan die while he and I played his little game of Mexican standoff. I'm thinking if I'd killed him, the world and my brother would be a lot safer."

"You best not be saying things like that because if I find anyone with any bullet holes in them, I'm gonna come looking for you."

Vin leaned against the patrol car and chose his words carefully. "I've been toting a rifle for a few years now. I don't make a habit of missing. If I had planned on shooting one of them fellas, I would have. You'll find my bullet in that sorry excuse for a tree," he gestured towards the parking lot's lone, stunted tree. "I fired once, and there is one bullet in that tree. You'll find it three feet up next to the knothole."

Harris didn't bother walking over to inspect the tree. There would be a bullet in it, and he knew by the tilt of the man's head and the almost snarl on his lips that this son of Landon's would take it amiss if he doubted his word and went to check. Something about this man he liked, so he decided to put all his cards out on the table.

"Never had anything like this, not here. I'm going to find the men who did this and throw their asses in jail. That lady over there is taking pictures and videos of everything said and done tonight. Now, I don't know what kind of story she'll tell. She's the daughter-in-law of Judge Travis, and he is still an important man around these parts, so I can't say much against her. I've heard she has quite a following on social media, and what she reports will be seen by a lot of people. She reports it one way, you and your brothers will look like heroes. She reports another way, me and my department will look like inept country bumpkins.

"I do know, the defense attorney these punks will get when I find them, will be looking long and hard for any bit of information they can use to help him get these bottom feeders off. The climate in this country, right now, says punks like these are misunderstood. I don't want people saying that about those men. I want them thrown behind bars for attempted murder. If I don't check your rifle and match it with the bullet in the tree, it will appear I am playing favorites. I want those bastards found, I want them arrested, and I want them to serve time. Your brother hasn't been the first man attacked, and if we mess up and they get off, they'll do it again. The next time, their victim might not have brothers to rescue him."

"Fair enough," Vin heard the sincerity in the man's voice, and tossed him the rifle.

"I'll personally drive it out to the ranch as soon as the lab finishes." He believed the man about the location of the bullet, and the Judge said there was only one gunshot, but this way, if someone did show up with a bullet hole, at least he would have ruled out one of the too many around in these parts.

"Tell me, sheriff, do you have any clue about who did this?" Vin leaned against the car; his knee ached, and until he got a chance to take a better look, he wanted to keep his weight off it.

The sheriff ran a hand through what was left of his hair and turned to check on his deputies before answering. "Six months ago, I heard of a rally... white supremacist," he spat as though ridding his mouth of an awful taste. "I went, curious to see who I knew would be there. Saw a man from Eagle Bend I know, couple cowboys who pass through regular like--rodeo types and Terry Hand-- he lost his ranch a couple of years ago. Didn't see anyone else from Four Corners, and I know everyone in these parts. If they hadn't gone to the trouble of bringing a rope and a gas can to the clinic, I would have said it was kids behind those ski masks. This doesn't feel like kids, but kids are growing up harder and faster today. I could be wrong."

The sheriff looked Vin Tanner over, not bothering to hide the fact that he was trying to decide the type of man to whom he was talking. Another time, another place, he would have taken him to be young and pretty, but this night, he saw eyes which he suspected had never been young. The steel in the eyes and the grim determination on the face countered any claim, Vin Tanner was pretty. This was not a youth caught up in something he didn't understand. Vin Tanner was a man and a force to be reckoned with. That Larabee blood must run true.

Vin kept his eyes on the sheriff, waiting for his verdict. Either they would be friends, or he would have to find a way to work around the man. He knew that when the sheriff reached into the patrol car, turned off the lights, and leaned against the door, he passed whatever test the sheriff laid out for him. He dug into his coat pocket and found the pack of gum he always kept in his pocket. He took a piece and slid the pack across the car's hood toward the sheriff.

"First night here in Four Corners, I ate at the place across from the Sleepy Hollow. Some unsavory types were sitting at a table near the kitchen."

"Recognize any of them tonight?"

Vin came close to saying something flippant about them wearing masks, but he knew the sheriff trusted him to come up with a better answer than that. He looked towards the clinic. He stared hard into the night, but he didn't see the flashing lights of the ambulance or those of the squad cars. He didn't see the blonde woman talking to the old man who pulled up in a black van. He didn't see his brothers walk into the clinic. He didn't see the deputy walking along the grassy area on the far side of the parking lot. He saw the men who stood between him and Nathan.

"They were young...length, no bulk, like teenagers, maybe early twenties. They were tall, but not so tall to be noticed," he shrugged. He couldn't say much about their looks without guessing, and at times, guessing was worse than saying nothing. "Can't place them in the diner. Sorry."

"Well, I could only hope. They don't pay me the big bucks because the job is easy." Harris pushed himself away from the patrol car and started walking towards the clinic, chewing on the piece of gum Vin had shared. Vin leaned against the car and watched the deputies as they searched for information that the thugs, villains really, may have inadvertently left behind.



"Chris, listen to yourself. You are the original I-don't-need-a-yearly-check-up-because-I-am-as-healthy-as-a-horse man. Don't be a hypocrite." Nathan didn't bother to look over at Chris. He knew his brother wore the look on his face, which made grown men jump to do his bidding. Chris could just wipe the look off his face. He was not going to spend the night in the hospital for something as minor as a rope burn. "Chris, if I go to the hospital, they win. I will not stand for them winning."

Chris nodded his understanding, but couldn't come out and say that. Instead, he said, "You are being muleheaded."

"Learned from the best."

Chris almost smiled; Nathan always blamed all his worst habits on him. He never knew whether to be pleased or insulted. He turned away from his brother and leaned his head against the wall. He did not bang it in frustration; he did not need to deal with a concussion on top of all the other things going on, but oh, it was tempting.

"Chris," Nathan untangled a pair of scrub pants that looked as though they would cover most of his long legs. He gave up on finding a shirt, though. He would just have to wrap a blanket around him for the drive home. "I'm going to get a shower and see if I can scrub off this stench. Can you drive me home? No, let's make that, can you drive me home without giving me any more grief?"

"I'll drive you to a hospital," Chris told the wall, visions of his brother hanging from the porch coloring the tone of his voice. His hands turned into fists and rested against the wall on either side of his face.

"Chris, if you don't back off, I'll drive myself." Nathan winced as Chris turned around to look at him. He hated it when Chris got so very angry. He knew the anger wasn't directed at him, not really, but since there wasn't anyone else in the room, it sure felt like it was.

"You need to be in the hospital," Chris insisted. He had used his glare on Nathan one time too many as kids, because it certainly wasn't working now. The man was worse than stubborn; he was acting plain stupid.

"I'm fine. It's just a rope burn." Nathan dropped a hand on Chris's shoulder, wanting to reassure Chris. "Emmett looked me over. He agrees it looks worse than it is. Now, are you going to drive me, or do I drive myself?"

"You know you are being an ass," Chris let out a long breath as he capitulated. He would drive him back to the ranch, and he would shut up about the hospital. Nathan was a grown man, capable of making his own decisions—even if they were really stupid decisions. He wouldn't like it, not one little bit, but he'd be quiet about Nathan's stubbornness and his stupidity. On the other hand, Buck wouldn't. He'd just sic over-protective, mother-hen Buck on Nathan. He smirked at Nathan, "All right, I'll drive you home."

"Thanks," he should feel better, seeing as how Chris wasn't going to make any more of a fuss, but the smirk on Chris's face worried him.

"Just wait until Buck sees you," Chris said almost under his breath.

"No," Nathan grimaced at the thought of a hovering Bucklyn Reed Wilmington. "There's no call for you to go home and get him all worked up. You know how he gets."

"Nate, it's not like you can hide what happened." All humor left his voice, and Chris became deadly serious. "Besides, Buck's been around here while you were in Alabama, and I ... I was gone. He knows everyone. He may know something about the people who did this," Chris gestured to Nathan's neck.

"He might not, Chris. Think the people who tried to h-hang me would talk to my brother about it beforehand?" Just great, he was not going to start stumbling over words. He needed to be strong. He could not ever let anyone know how scared he had been, or they would win.

"Don't be stupid," Chris glared at Nathan. Of course, he didn't think anyone would tell Buck they were planning on hanging Nathan, but people talk to Buck. They confide in him. Nathan knew that. With any luck, someone may have said something to his brother, which would give them a clue as to who would do something like this.

"Don't be disappointed," Nathan grabbed the scrub pants and headed to the shower. He still reeked of gasoline, and even though no gasoline had actually gotten in his eyes, and even though the paramedics and then Emmett had flushed his eyes, the fumes coming from his skin irritated them.



Chris sat on the edge of the bed and listened to the movements in the shower and almost called out to ask Nathan if he was OK, but kept quiet. Nathan didn't need to be talking; his voice sounded hoarse, and he needed to keep quiet. Nathan didn't even need to be showering. He needed to be in the hospital, letting someone else take care of him. Hardheaded, that just about summed up Nathan. Kept insisting he was all right, even had Emmett Griggs on his side.

Well, he wasn't all right. All you had to do was take a good look at his neck and at his wrists and at the finger with its ripped-off nail to know he was not all right. All you had to do was see the faint tremor in his hands to know he was not all right. All you had to see was how haunted and scared his eyes appeared when he thought no one was looking, to know he was not all right. Anyone with a brain in their head could tell, even though Nathan kept saying 'I'm fine', he wasn't, and it would be a long time before he would be fine.

Chris suspected the reason Nathan was adamant about not going to the hospital was that his need to feel safe was more demanding than his pain. He'd be safe at the ranch; his brothers would make sure of that. Nathan's need to feel safe and his own need to ensure his brother's safety were the reasons he hadn't thrown Nathan in the back of the ambulance, slammed the door shut, and told the driver to 'git.' The need for a safe place didn't belong to just Nathan; he needed Nathan at home where he could watch him and make sure his brother was protected.

Sudden anger surged through Chris and forced him to his feet. He needed to kick something or someone—preferably someone in a black ski mask. Damn, they had almost taken his brother from him. Chris ran through it all again, for the hundredth or thousandth time, in part to see if he could remember any clues as to their identities and in part so he could relive the moment he realized Nathan was still alive. If he relived it enough, maybe, just maybe, that memory would replace the mind-numbing fear he felt when he saw his brother hanging from the porch.

He never, not even in his most mind-destroying nightmares, thought of seeing his brother hanging from a rope. Nathan was gentle and kind. He lived to help people, for God's sake. He was not the kind of man who got lynched. Buck was the brother he worried about, slipping in and out of beds like he did. One day, an irate husband was going to do something awful to Buck, but Nathan? Nathan had never committed an evil act in his life. He had never done anything to hurt anyone. What kind of sick people would attack a man such as Nathan?

So many thoughts crossed his mind as he ran down the alley alongside Vin to investigate the noises they heard. Vandals had been his first thought, bored kids breaking the windows of the clinic or something. Then, he thought drug addicts were breaking into the clinic. Nathan spent

Saturday night (and was that just last night) talking about the security system Emmett installed to keep addicts out of the clinic, and so kids looking for drugs were on his brain. It had been Nathan's voice that pulled them from the truck and made them run down the alley, but it had been those other sounds that made his blood run cold. An animal caught in the garbage bin or the wind pushing something against the ground, he prayed. His brain refused to comprehend the possibility that the awful, strangling, gasping sounds were human-made, but those sounds urged him to run faster than he ever moved before.

He sensed something was bad wrong. He recognized when he heard Nathan's shout the danger his brother was in. The pounding in his chest was not from the demands he was placing on his body but from the sure knowledge that Nathan's life was being threatened.

Danger. What an inadequate word. Danger! They had a fuckin' rope around his neck. His brother had long passed in danger; he was choking and dying with his hands tied together and his legs kicking about, seeking something to brace against to relieve the pressure around his neck. Damn, it could have turned out so differently. He'd find those bastards, and they would pay. He'd make sure nothing like this would ever happen to Nathan again...or to him. There was no way, in hell, he would let another thing happen to his family; he couldn't survive another loss.

He heard the water cut off, and he cut off his thought of vengeance. He wiped the anger from his face and relaxed his clenched fists. The time for fighting had passed. Nathan was safe. Make no mistake, he wanted to tell those men, the time for fighting would come again. They would pay, and Nathan would stay safe.



Nathan entered the small cubicle, disguising itself as a bathroom, and firmly shut the door behind him. He didn't bother with the lock; Chris was on the other side of the door, acting as a barrier between him and the world. To lock the door would make it seem as though he thought Chris was inadequate for the task, and he didn't want Chris to feel that way. Chris was already busy beating himself up for not being around to prevent the attack, and he was wrong to do so. Chris wasn't his personal bodyguard (as if either of them would survive that), and he needed to understand as much as he would like to, he couldn't control the world. Therefore, he shouldn't hold himself responsible for the actions of others. The fact was, exactly as he had when they were kids, Chris showed up in the nick of time.

Nathan tore open his shirt and tried to examine his neck, but quickly gave up. The mirror was barely large enough for shaving purposes, and he couldn't get a good look at his neck. It didn't matter; he had a really good idea of what it looked like and didn't need to examine it to know how close he had come to dying. The memory of his attack, the hate directed towards him, made him physically ill. He swallowed hard against the nausea, refusing to give in to it. He needed to be strong. He needed to get cleaned up enough to go home. He dug into his pockets and pulled out his wallet and keys, and dropped them into the sink. He rinsed his keys off and turned his attention to his wallet. He couldn't tell how much gasoline had soaked into the wallet, but he washed off the outside, careful not to get water on the contents.

He sniffed at it, but he couldn't tell if any of the gasoline smell permeating the room came from the wallet or if it all came from him. He'd ask Buck if he had something he could use until he could get to the store to buy a new one.

He tossed the wallet beside the keys, furious. How dare they? Angrily, he stripped off his gasoline-drenched clothes and stuffed them, along with his ruined coat, in the garbage bag Emmett found in the break room. Those clothes would never be clean enough to be wearable. Didn't matter; he never wanted to see them again. He opened the door long enough to throw the bag towards Chris, knowing his brother would get rid of it for him.

He turned on the water in the shower. He wanted the shower hot, really hot—just shy of scalding. Maybe then, he could wash away the feel of their hands and that of the rope. He brushed away the tears, refusing to let them fall in front of the others, hoping the sound of the shower would drown out the sound of his crying.

Letting the tears fall down his cheeks, he unwound the bandage Emmett had wrapped around his finger and looked at the damaged nail; it would be tender, and the finger would be unprotected, but it would heal. He dropped the gauze and the tape into the garbage can, thinking



it had been kind of wasteful to wrap his finger when he planned on showering afterwards, but Emmett needed something to do, and his 'my poor boy, my poor boy' was beginning to irritate.

He didn't have the energy to soothe Emmett's shattered nerves. He selfishly hoarded his dwindling stamina; all he could manage to do was to wordlessly allow Emmett to bandage his finger and apply ointment to his neck and wrists. Emmett wanted him to say he was all right, and he had, but the smile Emmett needed, the slap on the back that said everything was going to be fine, he didn't have the strength to give his mentor those reassurances.

He needed all his reserves for himself if he was going to stay strong for his brothers. He'd apologize to Emmett in a few days when he no longer had to lock his knees to keep from sinking to the ground.

The steam from the shower filled the room, making it too difficult for Nathan to continue standing there looking at his finger. He picked up the scrub brush with its hard bristles meant to get the dirt from underneath nails and stepped into the shower.

Handing Haley, the last of the apples, Buck wiped his hands on his jeans as he ducked under the cross tie, holding the mare, "I'll get it, JD; you finish wrapping her leg." Buck reached for the phone, but his eyes were on JD and the injured mare. Haley's leg was almost healed and probably didn't need the bandage, but Buck wanted to watch how his youngest brother handled an injured horse. "Hello o-o?" he sang into the phone, a smile on his face. "Well, hello, big brother. Missed you at evening chores. Reckon that trip to Bailey --"

Buck felt the blood drain from his face as he listened to Chris talk. He could tell both JD and Josiah had stopped what they were doing, and their eyes held concern and worry. He turned to the wall; he didn't have to see their faces, and he needed to concentrate on Chris's words. Chris hung up, and he stayed facing the wall with the phone against his ear, listening to the beating of his heart. He almost snickered, thinking the call had been the one time he had participated in a conversation with his brother in which Chris had done the majority of the talking. He hadn't said one word after Chris began talking, not one. And that was funny, if you knew Chris, and under normal circumstances, a talkative Chris would have made him laugh, but these were not normal circumstances. They hadn't been normal since his father died. Correct that; they hadn't been normal since Sarah and Adam died.

"Let's get finished here. JD, you did a good job with the bandage. Why don't you put Haley out in the corral? Josiah, let's finish up in the tack room," Buck told the wall.

"Buck? What happened?" Josiah asked.

Buck reached for the marmalade barn cat, darting out from behind a bale of hay, and began affectionately rubbing along his booted feet. "Hey, Jelly Belly, are you hungry?" He picked up the cat, carried him into the tack room, and, grabbing a handful of kibble, began hand-feeding the already fat cat. He knew he was avoiding Josiah's question; it was just that speaking of things made them come true.

"Buck?" Buck's picking up the cat and ignoring them, scared JD. Not more than fifteen minutes ago, Buck chased Stupid, the thin grey tabby, out of the barn when it began swatting at Haley's gently swishing tail. He said he didn't like cats helping when he doctored a horse. He said the only reason they had cats was to keep the vermin down. Now here he was, ignoring them by acting like Jelly was his best friend. "Buck, did something happen to Ezra?"

"Ezra? Chris didn't say anything about Ezra." Buck spared the kid a frown, but his attention quickly returned to the cat. "It was Nathan. Some men attacked Nathann at the clinic tonight."

"How badly is he hurt?" Josiah refused to think of the possibility that his brother was dead.

"Chris says he's okay." He took a deep breath and dropped the cat by his food bowl before continuing, "A couple of men tried to hang him. Vin and Chris heard the noise and crashed the party. He's bringing him home in a bit," Buck said, not bothering to tell them about the gasoline. They'd learn all the gory details later, after they got Nathan home and could see for themselves, he was all right.

"B... But that stuff doesn't happen anymore," JD protested.

"I guess it does," Josiah said, sorrow clinging to every word and making his voice deep and heavy. "Let's finish up here."

"No... We should go up to the house and... and" JD struggled to explain how out of place doing routine chores seemed. Doing them made it seem as though what happened to Nathan was unimportant.

"And do what? Stand by the door and wait? You live on a ranch, now, JD, and no matter what you are thinking or feeling, you have to take care of the animals," Buck explained, though he agreed with JD's sentiments; he, too, wanted to race out of the barn and to his car. He could get to the clinic before they left, and once there, he could see for himself that his brother was unharmed.

JD looked from Buck to Josiah. He heard the logic in what Buck was saying, but it still didn't feel right. He took a couple of deep breaths and forced the need to act away. "I'll take Haley out and put the medicine and stuff up," he said, and when Josiah nodded his approval, he knew he had made the right decision.



Nathan deliberately dropped the scrub brush. He had gone over every inch of his body at least twice, and the brush's bristles lay flattened and useless. If he continued to hold it in his hands, he would continue to scrub at his skin, and if he continued to scrub, he would bleed. He wanted to get clean, and in the back of his head, he knew he was clean. He just didn't feel clean.

He bit back a laugh or a sob, he wasn't sure which, but he stayed silent as he sank to his knees. How could this have happened? He was six feet four, made of solid muscle, and carried no fat. He ran and exercised routinely... And they still overpowered him. His father had taught him to defend himself, and... And he hadn't been able to do so. The hot water beat into his back as he wrapped his long arms around his legs and rested his head on his knees. He just felt so ... so damned impotent. If Chris and Vin hadn't shown up...

For two minutes, he told himself as tears mingled with the shower water, I'll be weak and self-indulgent, then I'll go back to pretending to be strong and unafraid. He rocked gently back in forth, barely noticing as the water finally started cooling.

How could someone do this? What had he done wrong? Thinking of his grandmother's comments over the phone, he wondered if the decision to hang him was related to the color of his skin. Was it that, or had he just been in the wrong place at the wrong time? Were they looking to make some sort of statement with his death, or had he been an inconvenience they needed to get rid of? Did those men use the color of his skin to justify their attack, as his grandparents used his skin color to justify their feelings of betrayal?

He hurt. It wasn't a place he could point to like his neck and say it hurts here or here on my wrists, but somewhere, deep inside his soul, he cried. Maybe, a long time from now, he could forgive the men who attacked him. Maybe, one day, he could say they were ignorant, and they did not know him, and he could let go of the pain and hurt they inflicted on him.

What about his grandparents? They knew him and they supposedly loved him, at least he thought they had, but the things they said were said with the intent of hurting him. What was he supposed to do about them?

He leaned his head against the stall. He wanted someone to say it had all been a bad dream. He prayed he would wake up, then he prayed for strength, and then he just prayed.



Vin watched the police examine the crime scene from beneath hooded eyes as he sat cross-legged on the hood of the Cadillac. Buck would have something to say about that, no doubt, but he wasn't sitting on the cold ground. The sun had fallen beneath the horizon, and with its disappearance, the wind had picked up. As far as Vin was concerned, it seemed to have targeted him, making sure to push the cold up under the edges of his jacket and down his neck. Several times, the sheriff mentioned he should go in and get warm, but he hadn't gone in. With Dr. Griggs and Chris both fussing over Nathan, he figured the clinic couldn't hold any more people. Besides, someone had to stay and watch to make sure the sheriff and the forensic team he called over from Eagle Bend did their job.

As far as he could tell, they were taking Nathan's near-fatal lynching very seriously. Deputies roped off the porch and a good bit of the parking lot, trying to keep the crime scene more or less intact. They took the gas can and the rope to a lab, but they hadn't found anything

else. They even sent a team to neighboring parking lots looking for tire tracks and other evidence, but from the shaking of heads, he figured they found nothing. It wasn't that he didn't trust them to do their job; he figured they hadn't had enough experience with crime scenes to know what to look for.

Sheriff Harris and Judge Travis both shook their heads and said something about this sort of thing didn't happen, not here in Four Corners. He'd let the deputies finish and get gone. Then, he'd look around and see if they missed something. He hated to admit it, because he wanted to give those bastards a taste of their own medicine, but he doubted he would find anything useful.

He blew on his fingers, trying to get them to warm up a little, and then stuffed them back into his coat's pockets. He had gloves in his truck, and he ought to get them, but the truck was still parked on Main Street, and if he walked up the alley, he would miss what the deputies were doing.

Vin pulled a hand from its warm pocket and, taking his eyes off the deputies, examined the tear in the knees of his jeans. One knee was bruised, he concluded after poking at it several times, but it wasn't too bad; the other knee was fine, no thanks to the overly enthusiastic deputy. The man apologized, and Vin caught him looking at him several times; each time their eyes met, the deputy turned red and mouthed another apology. Vin told him no harm done. He understood the deputy was only doing his job; he would have done the same if their situations had been reversed, but knowing that didn't make his knee feel any better.

He glanced towards the clinic and decided he had best keep the news of his hurt knee to himself. That doctor fellow kept coming to the door to check on the progress of the deputies. The poor man looked stunned; they all were, but Vin had the feeling the doctor was looking for something to do to keep busy and to keep from having to think about what almost happened. He figured, if he let on that his knee had gotten a little scrape, the man would insist on treating it, and in Dr. Griggs' current mindset, treating a bruise would probably include a cast. He'd rather just sit here and watch.

